

J. E. CUMMINS OBE, MEMORIAL ORATION

PREFACE

Ours is a scientific Society; and to twist an ancient quote: 'scientists, of all people, understand business the least'.

On 25 May 1995 your Society held a most successful symposium on science policy; and it has been recorded in this volume as Transactions. This was scientists talking to scientists.

To these Transactions has been added the Cummins Oration given by John Prescott on 22 August. The decision of your Council to include the Oration was made because of the obvious and urgent need for scientists to better understand business and businessmen. Science can no longer afford to remain separate from the mainstream activities of the community and the economy.

As governments contract their own spending, and as they vacate ever-broadening arcs of the economy to business, expectations for further change build up. The trend is world-wide—applying in Beijing as well as Melbourne; and it is still accelerating. It can hardly be reversed in our lifetimes.

We all know that business doesn't yet understand science sufficiently well, but that is no reason why science should fail to understand business.

John Prescott is Australia's premier businessman. As Managing Director of BHP, he leads a company over 100 years old which, by most measures in most years, is Australia's largest.

BHP is a company which exports to the world, competes against imports in our domestic market, and invests, constructs and operates on a vast scale in Australia and overseas. It is a company with a large and far-flung workforce which must be motivated and coordinated. Lastly, it is a company which must and does work with our government at the national level; neither can ignore the other.

These attributes qualify John Prescott to speak on the future of Australia, and on the roles in it of business and government. What he has written here is worth reading.

J. E. CUMMINS

The inaugural Oration of the Sciences Club took place in 1974, the Orator being Sir Louis Matheson. Thus a tradition was begun which has continued each year without interruption until the present time.

In 1989, following the death of J. E. Cummins OBE, the title of the Oration was changed to the J. E. Cummins OBE Memorial Oration to honour the man who was principally responsible for the erection of the National Science Centre which was completed in 1967.

In the early 1960s the idea was conceived within the CSIRO in which J. E. Cummins was a senior scientist, of a building which would house Scientific, Technological and Learned Societies at a reasonable rental. It was envisaged that the Centre would provide the opportunity for the interchange of ideas and a furtherance of knowledge.

J. E. Cummins (Jack as he was known), was personally responsible for raising most of the funds to build the National Science Centre, known also as Clunies Ross House. He approached many individuals and large and small corporations both here and overseas and his success can be judged from the fact that, when completed, the building was free of debt.

It was Jack who conceived the idea that Clunies Ross House should contain a venue where members of various Scientific and Technological Societies could meet in an informal manner. Thus it was that The Sciences Club became the social centre of Clunies Ross House.

Jack became the inaugural President of The Sciences Club in 1968. He was appointed to the Board of Governors of Clunies Ross House in 1971, retiring in the year of his death.

A change in the philosophy of the Board of Governors in the late 1980s resulted in The Sciences Club vacating Clunies Ross House in July 1990 and merging with the Royal Society of Victoria on 1 January 1991.

It is sad to reflect on the disintegration and demise of such a wonderful and idealistic concept. The Scientific, Technological and Learned Societies are once more scattered throughout Melbourne and the National Science Centre at 191 Royal Parade, Parkville has been partly demolished and redesigned as an apartment block.

MARGARET C. HARRIS
President of The Sciences Club 1990–1991